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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MADRID 001231

SIPDIS

PASS TO EUR/WE'S ELAINE SAMSON AND STACIE ZERDECKI, S/CT'S
MARC NORMAN, NSC'S ELIZABETH FARR, AND NCTC'S PAUL SAUPE

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SP](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: SPAIN: ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECENT ETA
ARRESTS IN FRANCE

REF: A. 2007 MADRID 1078

[B](#). 2006 MADRID 3111

[C](#). 2006 MADRID 766

Classified By: DCM Arnold A. Chacon for Reasons 1.4 (b), (c) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: French police and Spanish Guardia Civil (GC) paramilitary forces conducted a joint raid in Cauterets, France early on the morning of November 17 in which they arrested ETA members Mikel Garikoitz Aspiazu Rubina (aka "Txeroki" in Basque or "Cherokee" in English) and Leire Lopez Zurutuza. ETA's military chief since 2003, Txeroki represents the new generation of radical young hardliners who in recent years have supplanted the old guard and taken control over ETA. Roughly 48 hours after Txeroki's capture, Spanish Interior Minister Alfredo PerezRubalcaba publicly assessed that not only was Txeroki the military chief, but he had also assumed some political responsibilities following the May 2008 detention of Francisco Javier Lopez Pena, aka Thierry, which gave Txeroki control of overall strategy, thus making him the number one man in ETA. This cable provides an assessment of the arrests, identifies the roles of the detained, examines the capabilities of what's left of ETA, and discusses the political reaction in Spain. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Media coverage most often describes Txeroki, age 35, as the one who reportedly gave the order to bomb the parking garage at Madrid's Barajas airport (See Reftel A) in December 2006 that effectively ended the "permanent unilateral ceasefire" that ETA had declared nine months earlier (See Reftel C). According to recently arrested ETA members' comments in the media, Txeroki claimed to have been the trigger-man in the shooting deaths of two GC officials in Capbreton, France in December 2007. The Spanish media describe the arrests as a severe blow to ETA and note that, since ETA officially declared an end to its ceasefire in June 2007 (See Reftel B), Spanish and French security forces have detained the group's military, political, and logistical senior leadership.

[1](#)3. (S) Embassy Madrid POLOFF and Information Officer discussed the arrests on November 21 with longtime ETA watcher Jesus Maria Zuloaga (Please Protect), the Deputy Director of conservative-leaning, Madrid-based La Razon newspaper. A native of the Basque Country, Zuloaga is a well-connected source on ETA with contacts at the highest levels of the GC and Spanish National Police. He also says he considers Interior Minister Rubalcaba a personal friend. He is the author of a book on ETA and countless articles on the group over 22 years in journalism. He has been an ETA target for years, including the intended victim of a letter bomb in 2000. In self-imposed exile from the Basque Country,

he lives in hiding and says he undergoes extensive security precautions in his day-to-day life, including changing residences every two years, not owning a car, and never allowing his picture to be published. POLOFF also discussed the fallout of the arrests on November 24 with Oscar Beltran Otalora (Please Protect), political editor of the Bilbao-based newspaper, El Correo, and likewise an expert on ETA issues.

//The Arrests//

14. (S) Press reports note that French police and the GC found two handguns, two laptops, several memory sticks, maps and just 3,000 euros in cash, which media reports attribute to ETA's recent difficulties in fund-raising. Zuloaga says that the information in the memory sticks will be where Spanish security services will find the most valuable information, because ETA has instituted a policy of keeping PCs "clean." He added that ETA policy is to protect its pen drives with Pretty Good Privacy ("PGP") encryption software, Virus Script and Ultra Wipe, all of which are available for free. As of November 22, Spanish media reported that French security forces had not yet broken the "almost impenetrable" encryption and noted that in some cases in the past, ETA's encrypted communications have never been broken.

//Txeroki's Role Within ETA//

15. (S) When the arrests were announced on November 17, media outlets described Txeroki as the leader of ETA's military wing. He had held that role since 2003 and was a known

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quantity to Spanish security forces. Beltran told POLOFF that Txeroki had acquired a myth-like status within ETA, which made his detention a tough symbolic blow to the group. Rubalcaba publicly called him "probably the most wanted objective" of the Spanish security forces. However, by November 19, the Minister had re-evaluated his assessment of Txeroki's role and told state-owned radio network Cadena SER that Txeroki was in fact in charge of policy and strategy as well. Txeroki had assumed some political responsibilities falling the May 2008 detention of his rival, Francisco Javier Lopez Pena, aka Thierry, who had been ETA's political leader and the chief negotiator with the Zapatero government during peace talks in 2006, which Txeroki reportedly bitterly opposed. After Thierry's arrest, Txeroki reportedly suspended the power of ETA's Executive Committee, the group's highest authority, and assumed some of Thierry's duties, which effectively gave him control of overall strategy and made him the number one man in ETA. In Rubalcaba's words, Txeroki was "in charge of everything, the political apparatus and the so-called military apparatus. The one who ordered the killings was Txeroki."

//Txeroki's Successor As Military Chief//

16. (S) Even with Rubalcaba's re-evaluation of Txeroki's role, Zuloaga cautioned Embassy officials not to magnify the importance of his detention. Spanish press reports suggest that ETA's new military chief is Aitzol Iriondo Yarza, Txeroki's 31-year-old deputy who is an information technology expert with extensive experience in explosives and internal security. Zuloaga opined that Iriondo -- whose primary nom de guerre is "Gurbitz" but who is also known as "Gurbita," "Asier" and "Barbas" -- is more dangerous, radical, and methodical than Txeroki and will probably do a better job as military chief than Txeroki did. Zuloaga noted that, under Txeroki's leadership of the military wing, ETA claimed "only" seven lives in five years, which is lower than most previous five-year periods.

//Lopez Zurutuza's Role Within ETA//

17. (S) Most Spanish media reports have depicted Lopez Zurutuza as Txeroki's girlfriend. However, Zuloaga says this

is incorrect and tells Embassy officials his sources inform him that she is in fact the commander of ETA's "legal cells," i.e., those ETA members who have 9-5 jobs on weekdays but who are then operational -- including in carrying out attacks -- on weekends.

//Txeroki's Alleged Plans//

¶8. (S) The Spanish media report that Txeroki had planned to purge ETA's ranks of Thierry loyalists, whom he considered dissidents and not trustworthy. The media also report that Txeroki's appointment planner has a series of meetings scheduled until January 2009 in which he intended to create a cell composed of French Basques, who would be able to transit the border more easily and stay in hotels in Spain without arousing suspicion. Zuloaga assesses that Txeroki and Lopez Zurutuza were meeting for the purpose of implementing attacks in furtherance of ETA's November 5, 2008 communique, which Zuloaga described as conveying the most violent threats he had ever seen in his 22 years of monitoring ETA's activities. That communique and others have threatened to carry out deadly attacks to force the GOS back to the negotiating table.

//ETA's Status and Reprisals//

¶9. (S) Some Spanish media suggest that some 40 members of ETA may be identified by authorities and compromised following the arrest of Txeroki, while others suggest that ETA's dedicated, core group numbers just 100 members (a number which Beltran suggests is accurate). Post-arrest Spanish media reports suggest that ETA has only three operational cells left, although Zuloaga suggests there are "at least four or five." Meanwhile, Rubalcaba asserted on November 18 that among both ETA prisoners in Spanish jails and the radical Basque nationalists who support violence there is increasingly "a sense of growing weakness" and an almost unstoppable process of deterioration in their support and abilities, which he predicted will cause hardline leaders to attempt a reprisal as a show of strength and to bolster

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morale.

¶10. (S) Rubalcaba has announced that Spanish security forces are on maximum alert for prospective reprisals from ETA, which already has detonated a bomb in suburban Bilbao on the night of November 20, which did not kill anyone but caused extensive damage to a TV relay tower that is used by police and security forces for radio signals. Beltran remarked that the ETA attack was a very disproportionate and weak response in comparison to the blow that they had received. Nevertheless, he suggested that ETA could execute a stronger attack at any moment. Zuloaga concurred, opining that if ETA can carry out reprisals, they will. However, he noted that the border between Spain and France is "practically closed" and that at the moment it would be difficult to carry out ETA's usual modus operandi of bringing a stolen car from France into Spain to carry out a car-bomb attack. He assessed that ETA members are "fanatics, but not foolish," suggesting that the group will instead wait one or two months to regroup and then seek to carry out a more substantive attack.

//The Political Reaction//

¶11. (C) President Zapatero on November 17 publicly declared the arrest a "serious" and "decisive" blow to ETA's organization and capacity and a "huge advance" in the fight against ETA. He phoned French President Sarkozy to thank him for French counter-terrorism (CT) efforts and the two leaders agreed to convene in Madrid an extraordinary summit on CT measures in the coming weeks. The French Ambassador to Spain has publicly suggested the first quarter of 2009 is a likely timeframe. Spanish media reports also suggest that National Court Chief Prosecutor Javier Zaragoza will travel to France

in early December to secure a temporary extradition of Txeroki to Spain, where he faces 22 charges for a range of illegal activities. Meanwhile, Rubalcaba has publicly discarded any possibility that the GOS would renew negotiations with ETA. However, Beltran suggests that if things keep going the way they are for ETA, the terrorist group may in the long term be forced to ask for negotiations from a position of weakness.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: As Zapatero and Rubalcaba have indicated, the arrest of Txeroki is a landmark event in the GOS's more than 40-year battle against ETA. He is now in jail in Paris, where authorities have been unable to match the ballistics of the guns found in his possession with those used in the Capbreton murders. French officials have nevertheless charged him with leading a group with the objective of preparing a terrorist attack (ie., the Capbreton murders). The arrest also marks an important political victory for the Zapatero administration, especially when viewed of the context of other senior level ETA arrests since the end of ETA's ceasefire - three in 18 months and two in the last six months. The GOS post-Barajas crackdown on ETA is putting the squeeze on the group, whose internal divisions over the past several years are now being portrayed as a true split between the Txeroki and Thierry factions.

¶13. (S) COMMENT (CONTINUED): Zuloaga is right to caution against over-emphasizing the importance of Txeroki's arrest and Rubalcaba prudently states that the end of ETA is not at hand, but the arrests are indeed significant and will cause further damage to the dramatically weakened terrorist group, which appears to be reeling from a series of problems which include an internal schism on the direction the group should take, declining social support in the Basque Country which has led to decreased fundraising from their extortion activity, low morale and paranoia that the group has been infiltrated by the security services, frequent arrests that have created a larger (and politically divided) prison population than ever before, and an increasingly younger, more inexperienced leadership at the helm of the group. In the long term, Beltran suggests that the disenchanted ETA prison population -- which includes numerous former leaders of the group, whose views apparently carry weight -- is "one of the keys" to an eventual resolution of the conflict. He says the GOS has been engaging them to secure their support for an end to the violence. END COMMENT.
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